

Have you ever come across another person that gives you the feeling that you would like to know them better or do you know someone whose life has been an example for you to follow? Perhaps you have a favourite disciple in the Bible, whose life is an example for you.

There is a background story to our reading today, that can help us to understand how meaningful this Gospel passage is. It is all about "relationship."

John the Baptist and Jesus would have known each other. They were second cousins and may have participated in some larger family celebrations. Both had extraordinary circumstances happen around their birth with prophetic pronouncements and miraculous proclamations. (Luke.1.76-80, Matt.1.18-23) They may have, played together in their childhood days. Both would have been schooled in the religious practices of their day, attending worship in the temple or synagogue as they lived out their traditional lives.

Both had to contend with the authorities, who confronted and questioned them about their mission and leadership, mainly over the issue of authority and their licence to practice. (John 1.19-28, Matt 21:23)

Both challenged the spiritual leadership's misguided understanding and attitude towards God, His righteousness and love, confronting their misinterpretation of the law and the Prophets, becoming "blind guides", burdening the people with heavy legalism and empty rituals. (Matt, 3.7-11, Matt.23.13-36)

Both were to experience a terrible death.

Later in life, each followed their own distinctive ministry, yet they were very closely linked.

John goes into the wilderness, dresses in clothes of Camel's hair and eats a diet of locusts and wild honey. He probably resembled a wild prophet! His ministry was to call people to repentance and baptism in the River Jordan, as a sign of forgiveness and cleansing of sins, preparing the way for the coming of the Lord. He proclaimed the good news to the people that a more powerful "one" was coming after him. At this time John is unaware of who this might be as it had not been revealed to him. (John 1.29-35) (Luke 3.15-18)

Jesus dresses as an ordinary person and eats with very ordinary people, later being accused of eating with tax collectors, gluttons and sinners. (Mk7.1-7).

Both were called by God to do his will. John's was "to prepare the way of the Lord and make his paths straight" and Jesus' was to "Baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire," and to become "The Lamb of God who was to take away the sin of the world." (Matt. 3.11-12)

It must have been quite a defining moment when the two met and Jesus requested that he be baptized by John. John was very reluctant, wanting a role reversal and stating his unworthiness to oblige, but Jesus insisted that it was necessary and proper to fulfill all righteousness. The only instruction that John

2. had from God, was to recognize that "whoever the Spirit descended upon and remained, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." (Jn1.33-34)

What a moment for John, when Jesus' true identity was revealed, as he saw the Spirit descending like a dove and resting upon him, as God spoke the words, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased". Until that moment John had absolutely no idea. After this confirmation, he was able to proclaim, and testify that "this is the Son of God." (Jn1.29-34)

It was not unusual for leaders to attract followers. John had at least two that we know about and there were probably more that were attracted to his teaching.

The essential definition of disciple is a pupil or one who learns from a teacher. (1Ch 25:8) The Rabbi would teach the traditional law and other practices, such as prayer and fasting, ritual cleanliness, observances and spiritual guidance. The disciple could leave at any time and was not totally bound to the teacher. The aim would be to help the pupil gain wisdom and maturity.

One of these was Andrew who heard John the Baptist, identify Jesus as he passed by, as the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Andrew left John, sought his brother Simon (Peter) and brought him to Jesus, who changed his name from Simon to Peter. Meaning "rock".

The next day Jesus went to Galilee and found Philip, who was from the same city as Andrew and Peter. Jesus invited him to "follow him." Philip then finds Nathanael and with great enthusiasm announces "We have found Him that Moses (law) and the prophets wrote about, that Jesus of Nazareth was revealed as the long awaited one." (Is 42.1-9) (Deut.18.15-19) Jesus was known locally as the son of Joseph. (John 1.43-51).

No wonder Nathanael was so skeptical. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip encouraged him to see for himself, to make up his own mind.

What happens next is quite delightful as Jesus says of Nathanael, "Here is an Israelite in whom there is no guile." There is nothing deceitful about this man. Immediately defining his character. Curiously, Nathanael wants to know how he already knew him and was told by Jesus that even before Philip had called him, he had seen, observed him, under the fig tree.

It usually takes quite a while to really get to know a person and their character. Some may say about three years. Jesus was already using "discernment" which is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, now given to the Church, His body. (1Cor 12.7-11)

This is enough evidence for Nathanael to call Jesus "Rabbi, the Son of God and King of Israel". At this stage he probably thought of a national kingship.

3. Jesus doesn't just stop at introductions, but proceeds to say that he, Nathanael will see greater things than these, like the heavens opening and angels of God ascending and descending, on the Son of Man. (Acts 1.8-10; Acts 2,1-4) There was now direct contact between heaven and earth. God and Man together.

In this passage we are given many titles for Jesus: Lamb of God, Messiah, Rabbi, Son of God, King of Israel, Messiah and Son of Man. Jesus is both uniquely man and God. If only our young men today could see Jesus's example as to what true manhood is really like. (John 1.35-51)

I heard a story about a Grandmother who had a sign over a door which said "God is watching you." One day her young grandson began behaving rather out of character. On enquiring about the reason for the little boy's behavior that had made him scared and frightened, was that he didn't want to be caught- out doing the wrong thing, as God was watching, spying on him.

The Grandmother replied, explaining the true meaning of the words. that "God loves you so much that He cannot take His eyes off you," liberating the child to just be himself.

Are we being watched. Does this scare, intimidate or make us afraid of punishment? For many people this is their concept of a punitive, wrathful God. In reality, this is the opposite to the God that saves us, redeems us, forgives us, blesses us and loves us passionately.

We are his chosen people, worth dying for. He searches for us. We were known before we were even born. He knows our frame. The hairs on our head are numbered. He knows what is on our mind, before we speak. He is acquainted with our ways. We become a new creation, as soon as we acknowledge Him. (Ps.139 -Is 43:1-7) There is no condemnation. We are forgiven. Set free.

We belong to a new family, relationships, way of living. We are given the help of the Holy Spirit to do his work and enter into joyful worship. We are given spiritual gifts to help build His body (the Church). We have a new country, new Kingdom and title of "Royalty". We enter into the New Covenant of love. We are promised eternal life and that God will never leave or forsake us. Our names are written in the Book of Life. We have a destiny.

As Jesus saw and called Nathanael before he was even aware, so Jesus is watching and calling us into relationship as his disciple, so that we can learn to love Him, each other and even the unlovely!!!!

Ps.139 has the introduction as being about "The inescapable God". Where can I flee from your presence?" One of my favourite little books written by Francis Thompson has the title "The Hound of Heaven". It is about a pursuing lover (God) who will not let go or give up on the loved one, even if they are unwilling to yield.

My favourite quote from this is.....

"Whom wilt thou find to love ignoble thee, Save Me, save only Me? All which I took from thee I did but take, not for thy harms but just that thou might'st seek it in My arms. All which thy child's mistake fancies as lost, I have stored for thee at home: Rise, clasp My hand and come.'